

# From the Outside Looking in

## Part 1: The Merge

### Prologue: Goodbye

"I'm leaving," a girl with long blond hair and blue-gray eyes says solemnly, hands gripping the swingset they were sitting on tightly.

"What? Why?" another girl with short brown hair with a singular blond streak in her bangs and bright green eyes questions, looking at the other girl in disbelief.

The blond girl sighs and explains, "My parents got a new position in their job. It's in another city, so we have to move."

"Oh..." the brunette says sadly, looking away from the other girl, "I understand."

Both girls sit in silence, neither one of them wants to break it.

"Karmen! Come on, we have to pack!" shouted someone from across the park.

"Coming mom!" Karmen shouts back, "Sorry I have to go."

As Karmen dismounts the swing and turns towards the direction of the screaming woman, the brunette grabs her arm, screaming, "Wait!"

Karmen looks back at the girl to see her looking down at the hand clutching Karmen's arm. The girl looks up, tears in her eyes and asks, "Am I ever gonna see you again? You're the best friend I've ever had..."

Karmen smiled softly at the girl and said, "I'm sure we will meet again someday, Mackenzie."

Mackenzie gives Karmen a million watt smile as they hear the person again scream, "Karmen!"

"I'm coming mom!" Karmen screams back before looking back to Mackenzie and saying, "Goodbye, Mack."

Mackenzie smiles at her and pulls her into a hug. "This isn't goodbye, Karmen. This is a see you later type situation," she reassures.

Karmen smiles and hugs back, saying, "Ever the optimist." As they both pull apart they look at each other for one final time. Shaking her head, Karmen says, "But seriously, I have to go now. See you later?"

"See you later!" Mackenzie happily replies back as she waves at Karmen's retreating form. She ends up stopping at a woman that looks a lot like her and leaving the playground not long after. Mackenzie isn't sad though. There is hope for the future of their friendship, and that's all she needs.

## Chapter 1: The Realm

Mackenzie smiled softly as the memory of her once friend flooded her subconscious. It was a pleasant memory in her opinion. Although she hasn't seen Karmen in almost a decade, she still had hope that one day, they would find each other again. As feelings of hope flooded through her, a giant gust of wind flew through her waist-length hair. As she began to feel the world around her once again, she realized that she felt her feet planted on the ground.

*When... Did I start standing?* Mackenzie questioned in her mind.

As she slowly opened her eyes, she realized that she's not in her bedroom anymore. Instead she appears to be in a white void with ten identical looking doors surrounding her. She looks down to see that the floor seems to be covered in a pink mist that is surrounding her feet.

"Where am I?" Mackenzie shrieks.

"Woah, calm down there kiddo?"

Mackenzie whips around to see a man with a wild mane of orange hair and a pair of white wings. He's wearing a purple jumpsuit and white tank top and some brown boots. He has a goofy grin on his face and can see the mirth in his toxic green eyes. Finally, he wore some lavender goggles on his head.

"About time you visited this place," the man snarked.

"Who... are you?" Mackenzie asked, skeptically.

"Oh right, you haven't met me yet. Where are my manners," the man said as he face-palms, "The name's Cody. I'm your guardian angel."

"No, Devyn's my guardian angel... right?"

"Not necessarily. I don't want to bore you with the technicalities, so let's just say she's been doing my job for a while while I deal with a... situation."

"Okay, I think I understand..." Mackenzie replies, "What is this place?"

"That's not important. What is important is there's something you need to see. Now I will show you the way this time since it is important, but I might not be so forthcoming the next time..."

"And why would that be?" Mackenzie asks in a monotone voice, clearly done with Cody's shenanigans.

"Oh come on, Mack! I'm stuck here all day. I have to have some fun somehow."

"...I guess."

"Okay, now that we're on the same page..." Cody says as he snaps his fingers. Suddenly, one of the doors glows in an aqua aura, which leapt out at her. She jumped back away from the aura, but the aura snagged her. Her bright green eyes dulled and, as if something was controlling her body, she walked towards the door slowly.

Mackenzie recognizes this feeling. It was like when her roommate, who she thought was her guardian angel, Devyn, leads her away from harm, so she trusts what the aura is doing to her almost immediately. As she opens the door, a white light blinds her and she instinctively shields her eyes.

~~~~~

When the light fades, she's no longer in the void. In fact, she's in a hallway. The walls and floor are wooden and very rustic-looking. Once Mackenzie got control of her body once again, she looked around.

"...This place looks familiar..."

She continues looking around, when she sees a small window. Looking out the window, realization strikes her.

“Wait! Isn’t this the old mansion!”

That realization shook Mackenzie to her core. There was a reason why that place was abandoned. People thought it to be haunted, so no one dared go near it. With this realization, Mackenzie continued onward, this time much more carefully than before.

After looking around some more, she stumbles upon a glowing aqua orb. It has the same feeling as the aura before, so she gingerly walked towards it and touched it. The orb disappeared, and for a while nothing happened, that is until she hears a woman scream at the top of her lungs.

Mackenzie whispers, “What the...” Under her breath before she is interrupted by another blood-curdling scream. Nowhere to hide and now extremely panicked and worried about the woman, Mackenzie crouches down and quickly sneaks towards where she heard the scream. This ended up being an opening on the other side of the hallway that she was in.

She looks into the opening to see three characters in a room that looks like a lab. The first of the three was a sinister looking man, if she could even call him that. She couldn’t see much of the man due to the room being dark and the moon silhouetting the man. Even with these limitations, Mackenzie could see two defined features that made her think that this person was not fully human. This man had horns and a tail. His hair was shaggy and unkempt. There’s a sheath for a weapon resting by his left hip, from the shape and size of it it looked to be a sword of some type. The man was tall and thin. The only features that could be seen in the low light was his smirking mouth that was lined with sharp fangs and his blood-red eyes.

On the other side of the room, there was a couple, both in lab coats. They look to be in their mid-thirties. There was a man that was protecting a woman. The man had black hair with gray stripes that was cut short and vibrant blue eyes. Other than the lab coat, the man was wearing a black t-shirt with a computer decal on it and beige dress slacks. The woman has shoulder-length brown hair and hazel eyes. Other than the lab coat, she was wearing a purple t-shirt and a black skirt with gray leggings underneath. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Look, I don’t know who you are or what you want, but you’re trespassing on private property. I’m gonna ask you one more time to leave before I call the police,” the man stated.

At this response, the silhouetted man squinted his eyes, stopped smirking, and put his hands on his hips.

“Come on, man. All we are asking for is your kids. Why are you making this so difficult,” the silhouetted man growls.

“Why would you...” the woman stuttered.

The silhouetted man smirks once again and says, “So... you’re not complying, are you...”

“Even if there was a reason to comply with your demands, which there is not, there’s no way you are getting your hands on my kids!” the man retorts.

The silhouetted man begins cackling and lets out a blood-hungry growl.

“Guess it’s time for me to have some fun, huh,” the silhouetted man growls through a smirk.

“What do you...” The woman stutters out once again, but is stopped when the silhouetted man pulls out his concealed weapon, which as predicted is a very ornate and

expensive looking sword. He started stalking towards the two, causing the couple to walk backwards, looking less confident and even more terrified than before. Mackenzie, which is still hiding behind the door, watches on in horror, breathing becoming heavy. She had to save them.

Just as that thought went through her head, Mackenzie's blond highlight started to glow, causing her panic to stop suddenly, now being overruled by confusion. The glow disappeared as quickly as it appeared. She shakes her head to alleviate her confusion and any lasting fear and determinedly looks on at the horrific scene before her and begins to charge into the room... only to be stopped by a hand on her shoulder.

Nerves already being frayed, Mackenzie quickly turns around and punches whoever tries to touch her, only to find her friend, Devyn, on the other side of the punch. They have shoulder-length straight black hair and magenta eyes. They have a set of ivory horns circling around their head like a crown. They have six wings, two gray, two white, and two gold that all seem to shimmer, even in the low light. They always seem to have a calming aqua aura around them. They are wearing a black tank top and camo pants, with brown combat boots.

"The hell, kid!" Devyn exclaims. Mackenzie shushes them before they say anything else and points to the scene before them. Devyn looks towards Mackenzie in confusion, then looks at the scene. They don't show any emotion at watching the scene ahead of them.

"Oh, that," they sigh, "I knew you weren't ready to handle this information, especially with his cryptic ass giving you the details."

As Devyn looks back at Mackenzie, she begins to cry. Devyn opens her mouth to explain, but stops when they hear, "Sorry it has to end like this, but we need those kids. They're an important part of our plan, after all." Devyn looks up at the scene as the silhouetted man reaches the couple, who were now backed into a corner.

Devyn looks at Mackenzie and shakes her head. "Come on, let's go. No need to be traumatized by this shit."

Mackenzie looks at Devyn in disbelief as she tries to get Devyn's hand off her shoulder.

"We can't just leave them there. They're gonna get killed!"

"Listen, I'll explain everything when we get out of here, but right now, you're just gonna have to trust me..."

Devyn was cut off by the sound of a sword swinging. The silhouetted man had poised his sword to strike the couple. Devyn tightens their hold on Mackenzie's shoulder as they try to lead Mackenzie away from the scene, but Mackenzie starts struggling against them as they both hear "Wai...". As they reached the door, they could hear the sword cutting through flesh and the screams of the couple. Mackenzie begins to cry as Devyn pauses. *Dammit... I was too late.*

~~~~~

A bright white light emerges and Mackenzie and Devyn were in the same white and pink void that Mackenzie woke up in. Devyn closes the door and sighs as they push Mackenzie forward, and Mackenzie struggles to get back to the door. The door locks, and while Devyn sighs in relief and lets go of Mackenzie's shoulder, Mackenzie falls to her knees and starts balling. Devyn can't look at her in this state, so they look up to the sky, a stray tear coming down their cheek. Sorrow quickly turns to frustration however as they hear, "So... How'd it go."

They turn towards the voice so fast that they almost give themselves whiplash to see Cody with a smug look on his face. They stalk towards Cody and give him a big slap in the face.

“Ow! What the heck, Dev. I thought we both agreed to let her see this. You didn’t even let her see the most important part!”

This caught Mackenzie’s attention. If that wasn’t the important part of what she just saw, then what was?

“No, what you did was traumatize a child with no instruction beforehand. I only agreed to show her this because I was certain I would be the one to explain things. You’re way too cryptic for your own good. You know this!”

“Well, I was just following orders. And you’re forgetting something too…” Cody pouts.

“And what exactly is that?”

“That instead of comforting said traumatized child, you decided to argue with me,” Cody replied playfully.

As Mackenzie growls, they both look towards her. She is now standing, hands clenched so tightly that they were shaking. In a burst of rage, Mackenzie shouts, “Why did you pull me away! I could’ve done something!”

Devyn groans out, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” under their breath, their face in their hands. “You see, this is why you explain these types of things properly, Cody.”

“You never let me have any fun,” Cody pouts.

“Hey! Don’t fucking ignore me!”

“Sorry kid, looks like we owe you an explanation. The short version is you couldn’t actually do anything.”

“How do you…” Mackenzie starts saying before Devyn dashes towards her and puts their hand over Mackenzie’s mouth, muffling her screams.

“Kid, you need to calm down. I’ll explain, but you’ll need to listen to me… Okay?”

As Devyn says this, Mackenzie stops struggling. She raises her eyebrows in shock, then as her eyebrows furrow again, she nods. Devyn removes their hand from Mackenzie’s mouth as she folds her arms.

“So… why don’t you think I could save those two? Do you really think I’m that fragile, that I need protecting?” Mackenzie asks.

Devyn sighs and looks down as she solemnly says, “No, that isn’t it at all. You see, what you just saw was a memory. From who… I don’t know. All I know is that all you saw here was in the past. There’s nothing you can do about it now.”

“Yeah. Even if this place could make you time travel, we still probably wouldn’t let you save them as it would change too much of the timeline,” Cody added, causing Mackenzie to stare daggers at him.

“Not helping,” Devyn seathes.

Mackenzie shakes her head and says, “I think I get it. So you guys brought me here to see these memories… why?”

“Unfortunately, we can’t give that information freely, kiddo. If it were up to me, you’d already know that answer, but somebody took you out of the memory too early.”

“If you explained things properly, I wouldn’t have to,” Devyn explains, causing Cody to pout, “We brought you here because we thought it’d be beneficial to you to have this information. As you’re sleeping right now, we thought it’d be the perfect time to do so.”

“Wait, so I’m dreaming right now?” Mackenzie questioned.

“Yup,” Both Devyn and Cody said simultaneously, then Devyn said, “Well, it’s more nuanced than that, but that basically sums it up.”

Mackenzie looks towards the ground and mumbles, “...Why did it feel so real, then?”

At that, both angels freeze up and look at each other, but quickly gain composure once again. Devyn shrugs and says, “Beats me, kid...”

Mackenzie narrows her eyes, gaze firmly placed on the two, who are now rubbing the back of their head. “You know, you’re both really bad liars.”

Devyn jumps at the statement, then sighs and says, “Geez, you’re too perceptive for your own good, you know that?”

Mackenzie rolls her eyes and starts tapping her foot. Her arms fold as she stares at Devyn once again. After a small staring contest, Devyn sighs and says, “Okay, you got me. But in all honesty, I can’t tell you just yet.”

“Seriously, Mackenzie pouts.

Cody closes his eyes and shrugs his shoulders as he says, “Sorry kiddo, that’s just how things work up here.” Mackenzie scoffs at this.

“Look, we don’t make the rules, we just have to live by them. If it were up to me, I would tell you everything I know. Unfortunately, it isn’t.”

“...Alright...” Mackenzie dejectedly says.

“Great, now with all that out of the way, I have to go. I have another mission. Hopefully I’ll see you soon kiddo,” Cody says as he snaps his fingers, disappearing in a flash of light.

Devyn sighs and says, “Oh Cody, always being a showoff...” They turn towards Mackenzie and smirks as they say, “Now it’s time to wake up! School starts in 20 minutes.

“Wait, what!” Mackenzie exclaims, shocked.

## Chapter 2: The Reunion

Mackenzie jolts awake and jumps out of bed as fast as she could as she yells, "Oh no, I'm gonna be late!"

She quickly strips out of her pajamas and finds a white t-shirt and an orange skirt in her closet. She puts on her clothes and runs out of her room to the bathroom. Devyn rolls their eyes as they notice Mackenzie left her boots, bookbag and jacket in the room. As they walk towards the offending items, a sudden surge of energy courses through them, making them stop.

"What the hell was that!" Devyn exclaims under their breath. They shrug off the ominous feeling and continue to walk towards their destination. She was thwarted in her endeavor as she bumps into the bed's frame instead.

"Fuck!" they exclaimed. As they were jumping around, they realized that they actually bumped into something. "Wait, I'm not supposed to be able to touch things in this world..." Devyn looks at the items that Mackenzie left behind once again and cautiously approaches them. They first pull the jacket off the coat rack, only to see that she can indeed hold the jacket. This fact startles them, dropping the jacket and shrieking in the process.

"Hey, Dev. Are you alright in there?" Mackenzie questions from the other room.

Devyn shakes their head to snap them out of their shock and says, "Yeah, don't worry about me. Just get ready."

"Okay, if you say so."

Devyn sighs and quickly brings their fingers to their chin in thought as they say, "Uh oh, this is definitely something that I should look into. It could be that they..." Devyn shakes their head and says, "Maybe I'll look into it later when I have the time. For now, I have to help the kid get ready for school."

Devyn grabs the jacket from off the floor as well as the bookbag in the corner and the combat boots next to the door. They open the door and walk towards the bathroom, where Mackenzie is rapidly brushing her waist-length hair.

"Hey, you forgot something," Devyn states as they enter the room with the jacket, bookbag and combat boots. Mackenzie looks at them frantically and dashes towards Devyn to grab her stuff.

"You know, if the circumstances were different, I would be lecturing you right now," Devyn admonishes.

"Come on, I'm not that bad!" Mackenzie says as she shoves her shoes on her feet and throws her jacket on.

"This happens at least once a week, kid," Devyn deadpans.

Mackenzie straightens up like a deer caught in headlights, but quickly settles and folds her arms, saying, "How would you know that I wasn't in that place once a week, hmm?"

Devyn sighs as she states, "I was literally the one who let you in there. It's my domain. If you've ever been there before, which you haven't, I would've been the first one to know.

Mackenzie groans and yells, "Okay, okay, I get it. Now shut up! I need to focus!"

Mackenzie tosses her bookbag on her back and bolts out the door. Devyn laughs as the strange surge of power starts to diminish, stopping them in their tracks in shock.

"The weird energy. It's back to normal again." Devyn walked carefully towards the door, reaching out to touch it, only for their hand to pass through the door. They pull their hand back and say, "I guess I'm back to normal now."

They stare at their hands for a few more seconds before shaking their heads and saying, "Eh, this is a problem for future Devyn." Devyn phases through the door and sees Mackenzie already way ahead of them. They run after Mackenzie, yelling, "Hey! Wait up!"

~~~~~

Mackenzie sprints towards her school. "Come on, almost there..." she says under her breath. As she reaches the school, she speeds up to inhuman speeds, seeing her two best friends, Mark and Macy. Macy is leaning against the gate. Her long brown hair with black tips was fashioned in a high ponytail. She is wearing gray jeans and a bright red hoodie. Her hazel eyes that shine with intelligence are slightly narrowed in a teasing manner directed towards Mark, who is pacing back and forth. Mark has tanned skin and pink hair with black roots. His eyes are a vibrant blue. He is wearing a light gray hoodie and dark blue jeans.

"Guys!" Mackenzie exclaims. They both turn towards her voice. Mark stopped pacing and waves at Mackenzie enthusiastically while Macy calmly looks towards her and nods her head in greeting. When she reaches them, Mackenzie slows to a stop, panting and placing both hands on her knees.

"Hey Mack! You're right on time!" Mark exclaims.

Mackenzie looks up and sighs in relief, saying, "Oh thank god, I thought I was gonna be late for sure this time."

Macy chuckles and says, "C'mon, we should head inside." Mark and Mackenzie nod in unison and they all walk towards the school's entrance

~~~~~

Devyn had finally caught up to Mackenzie while the trio were walking towards their investigative journaling class. Gasping for breath, they asked, "Did you really have to run that fast?"

"I'm not doing this right now," Mackenzie retorted.

"What why-" Devyn began to ask before realization hit them. They gasped and said, "Oh... right. I keep forgetting that nobody can see or hear me. I'm sorry. But still, I didn't even think you were physically able to run that fast. I mean I couldn't catch up with you, and I can fly!"

"Well-" Mackenzie started before she was interrupted by Mark saying, "Who are you talking to, Mack?"

Mackenzie whips her head towards Mark like a deer caught in headlights while he looks on, tilting his head in a confused manner. Devyn cringes while Mackenzie laughs nervously.

"Oh, well, I was just talking to myself! You know me!" Mackenzie deflected nervously.

"Okay..." Mark skeptically said. He wasn't sure if he believed Mackenzie or not, but decided to let it go for now. Better to not think about the intricacies of Mackenzie's brain. Instead he shook his head and changed the subject by saying, "Anyways, guess what?"

"What is it, Mark?" Macy interjects.

"We are getting a new transfer student today!" Mark excitedly exclaims.

"Really? This late into the year?" Mackenzie questions with equal enthusiasm.

"Yeah, I know right. Her parents just moved here I think," Mark explained.

"Wait, how'd you get this information, Mark?" Macy asked skeptically.

Mark just shrugged and said, "Perks of being the school president, dear Macy. They have to tell me these things so I can do my job."



“No they don’t, they told you because they want to put their best foot forward,” Macy laughs, “But I guess you’re off the hook this time. Who knew being such a people person has it’s perks.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing,” Mark retorts.

“It is if you use it the wrong way, lest we forget the pizza incident last year, Mr. President.”

Mackenzie shivers as she says, “Total anarchy...”

“Hey! Pizza day is very important to the student body, you two! It helps boost morale.”

Macy laughs and says, “I guess you’re right. Back on topic, don’t you think this is a little strange? Normally we don’t get transfers here, especially in the middle of the year...”

As Macy trails off, Mark shrugs his shoulders and states, “I guess, when you put it that way, it does feel a little odd. Either way, we should make her feel welcome. I also heard through the grapevine that we have a big group project going on in our investigative journaling class. We should invite her to join our group.”

“Wait,” Mackenzie interjects, “How do you know about this new girl being in our investigative journaling class? Or about the group project?”

“Well...” Mark starts to say before he was interrupted by Macy saying, “Dear Mark, what did we say about using your authority to get information on school projects?”

“To not to,” Mark sighs, “But I promise I didn’t do so this time! I just so happen to be good friends with that particular teacher, and she just loves to talk. That’s all, I swear!”

“Right...” Macy says, staring daggers into Mark, clearly not believing a word he says.

“Stop looking at me like that!” Mark states, folding his arms around his chest in a defensive gesture.

Mark and Macy start bickering and Mackenzie sighs, checking out of the conversation entirely. Devyn leans towards Mackenzie and whispers, “Are they always like this?”

“Pretty much.”

“...They bicker like an old married couple.”

At this statement, Mackenzie couldn’t stop herself from bursting out laughing. A few people looked towards her as if she suddenly sprouted wings. She notices the stares and stops laughing, blushing in embarrassment.

“Oh, it looks like we’re here,” Devyn exclaims, pointing at the door to their classroom as Mackenzie follows their finger with her eyes.

Mackenzie taps Mark’s shoulder, who snaps his head towards Mackenzie and angrily screams, “What, Mack!”

Mackenzie jumps back and throws her hands up in a defensive gesture and says, “Calm down! Geez.” She points towards the door to their classroom and says, “ I just wanted to tell you that we’re here.”

Mark looks at where Mackenzie is pointing and blushes. Macy blushes as well.

“Oh, I guess we are...” Macy replies. Mark replied sheepishly afterwards with, “Yeah...”

Mackenzie laughs it off and motions for the other two to follow her. They all walk into the classroom and stand in the front.

“Hey look over there!” Mark exclaims.

Mark points to a girl in the back row who is anxiously wringing her hands. She has shoulder-length blond hair and blue-gray eyes. She’s wearing a light pink t-shirt and a gray skirt.

“That’s the new girl?” Macy asked.

“Looks like it,” Mark replied.

“She looks familiar,” Mackenzie remarks, not sure where this feeling of familiarity is coming from.

“Really?” Mark asks.

“I think so. I just can’t place where...” Mackenzie says.

“Well, let’s go say hello!” Mark exclaims.

“She looks shy, maybe we should...” Macy tries to explain, but is interrupted by Mark yelling, “Hey, new girl!”

The blond haired girl yelps as our trio reaches her desk.

“You really shouldn’t talk until I’m done. Look, you’ve scared her off!” Macy admonished in a monotone voice.

“I don’t see you trying though,” Mark muttered under his breath.

“I would’ve, but you couldn’t hold your fucking toungue for two more fucking seconds!”

“Why you...” Mark growls as the two start bickering once again. Mackenzie laughs and turns towards the frightened girl.

“Ignore them, they do this all the time,” Mackenzie explains.

“Really?” the girl questions with a slight stammer in her voice.

“Yeah, that’s just their relationship,” Mackenzie says.

“Oh...” the girl quietly replies.

There was a long silence after that, but Mackenzie stopped it when she asked, “So what’s your name? I can’t just continue calling you New Girl afterall.”

“Oh, it’s Karmen,” the girl, Karmen, said. Realization hit Mackenzie like a train as a huge grin gets plastered on her face.

“Oh, that’s why I remember you!” Mackenzie exclaimed excitedly.

“Huh?” Karmen questioned in shock.

“You were like my best friend in elementary school, but we had to part ways due to your parents,” Mackenzie explained, now buzzing in excitement.

“Oh year, I remember you,” Karmen excitedly says.

“I almost didn’t recognize you. You act so differently than when we were kids. If I remember correctly, you were a bit of a hothead when you were younger.”

“Haha, yeah. I guess time really does change a person huh...”

There was a long silence after that. Something stirred in Mackenzie’s gut, as if telling her that something was wrong. If anything, Mackenzie always trusts her gut, especially when it comes to other people’s emotions.

“Hey Karmen...” Mackenzie starts saying, but is interrupted by the teacher saying, “Alright, settle down.”

Everyone started to go to their seats, though Mackenzie had to flick Mark’s ear to make him and Macy stop bickering.

“Catch up later?” Mackenzie asks in a whisper.

“...Okay...” Karmen quietly replies.

~~~~~

“Alright class, now I have a big group project that I want you to do. You will be investigating a local landmark of your choosing in groups of four. For the rest of class today, I

want you to find your groups and think up a topic. Begin,” the teacher explained to the class. As she finished, everyone ran to find a partner, almost everyone running towards Ally, a girl with white hair and green eyes.

“Man, must suck to be Ally right now,” Mark says, watching as two students started to pull Ally in two different directions, screaming at each other how she wanted to be their partner.

“Yeah, almost everyone wants to be partners with her,” Macy concurs.

“Anyways, hey...”

“It’s Karmen, Mark. You would’ve known if you didn’t spend her whole introduction bickering with Macy,” Mackenzie deadpans.

“Excuse you, but I was defending my honor,” Mark defends.

“As if you had much of that to begin with,” Macy quipped, laughing a little at the end.

“You just need to shut it,” Mark snarks, rolling his eyes, “Anyways, before I get interrupted again, Karmen, you wanna join our group?”

“...What?”

“Yeah, you should totally join us. Definitely better than trying to find a partner in that mess,” Mackenzie said, looking towards the chaos that was unfolding with Ally and the two girls that are now having a cat fight with each other.

“Well, I guess I’ll join you guys... you are the only people I know thus far...” Karmen shyly replies, but before she could explain more, Mark butts in with an, “Excellent! Now the next topic is, well, a topic.”

“Actually...” Karmen whispers, but is interrupted again by Mark saying, “Oh, you have a landmark in mind?”

“Dammit Mark, let the girl speak,” Mackenzie retorts, “What did you wanna say, Karmen?”

“...I was actually wondering if, well, if we could pick the topic another time. I don’t really know the area that well as I haven’t been here for a while... I might need some time...” Karmen explains, slowly getting quieter and quieter.

“That’s a great idea, Karmen!” Mackenzie exclaims, “How about we meet this weekend at the usual spot.”

“...Usual spot?” Karmen asks.

“Don’t worry, I’ll send you the location,” Mark interjects, “Here, give me your phone!”

Karmen slowly pulls out her phone and gives it to Mark with an, “Uh... here?” Mark quickly snatches the phone from Karmen and inputs his, Macy’s and Mackenzie’s phone number, then takes out his phone and puts Karmen’s number in his phone. Mark gives her back her phone while saying, “There you go! I’ll make a group chat for us. Karmen, once you get the notification, state that it’s you so Mack and Mace can add your contact to their phone.”

“...Okay?” Karmen slowly replied.

“Great! Well...” Mark starts saying, but is interrupted by the bell ringing.

“Alright students! Off you go to your next class,” the teacher sings as she exits the classroom.

“Huh, I guess time’s up,” Mark says, “Well, I’ll see y’all tomorrow. I’ll make sure to make the group chat during lunch.”

“We’ll hold you to it,” Macy jokes. Mark gives Macy the stink eye, sticks out his tongue and turns to leave while saying, “Later.”

And with that, Mark bolts out of the room. Macy rolls her eyes as she stands.  
“C’mon Mack. Let’s get going,” Macy says while standing and walking out herself.  
“I’ll see you later, Karmen!” Mackenzie sings as she gets up to follow Macy.

~~~~~

Mackenzie is walking home from school, Devyn following closely behind her, as she feels her phone vibrating in her pocket. She takes out her phone to check it, only to see that Mark finally made the group chat for the investigative journaling team, saying:

Mark: Hey, sorry for taking so long. Had a meeting at lunch that I couldn’t get out of

Macy: Why is our chat name ‘the dream team’?

Mark: Hey, is it wrong?

Macy: ...I guess not...

Mark: Exactly.

???: Hey guys, this is Karmen.

Mackenzie smiled at her phone and quickly put Karmen’s number in her contacts.

“That girl was really jumpy today, huh?” Devyn asked Mackenzie.

Mackenzie looks at Devyn and explains, “Yeah, well it was her first day. It’s only natural that she would be nervous...”

Devyn rolled her eyes and said, “C’mon kid, I know you felt that something was wrong. You can’t pull a fast one on me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You said so yourself, she acts too differently than she did before.”

“...How long have you been watching over me, Dev.”

“Your whole life, kid. Comes with the job.”

“Well, even if I do know there’s something wrong, there’s nothing we can do about it until she reaches out. We can’t go around spreading baseless rumors, afterall.”

“So what you’re saying you’d do something if you knew what was going on?”

“Why does this sound like you’re gonna spy on Karmen?”

“I’m not, wouldn’t help anyways. Stupid laws...”

“What are these laws you keep on referencing anyways?”

Devyn looks at her with a deadpan expression and says, “Nice try, kid. That’s also against the stupid laws. Rule one of the laws is don’t talk about the laws.”

Mackenzie sighs and says, “Cryptic as ever...”

“Anyways, let’s go home. You’ve got a lot of homework to complete.”

Mackenzie groans and says, “Don’t remind me.”

Devyn laughs as they continue the rest of the walk home in silence.

### Chapter 3: The Encounter

It's nighttime and while Devyn is sleeping soundly in the corner of the room, Mackenzie was sleeping in her bed, tossing and turning and whimpering in her sleep. When she opens her eyes, she finds herself in a familiar white void, looking at a sheepish Cody.

"Sorry I had to bring you here."

"Let me guess, there's something you need me to see, and is there some sort of mechanism to get me to the right door?" Mackenzie questioned.

"There is something I need you to see, but there will be no mechanism this time," Cody explained, looking down at the ground.

"I thought you said you needed to have some fun while stuck here? Why the change of heart?" Mackenzie teased.

"Look, I know when to take things seriously, okay?" Cody yelled defensively, "Listen, the reason we brought you here last time wasn't fully realized. I had to bring you back so you could see the full story."

"The full story..." Mackenzie parroted.

"Next time, I won't make it so easy though, alright," Cody snarked, his personality shining through once again.

Mackenzie rolls her eyes as Cody laughs, snapping his fingers. The fifth door is shining in a blue aura as Mackenzie cautiously walks over and opens it. The door leads to another corridor in the same building, except this time, the building looks more weathered. There are numerous old pictures that have been torn to shreds. Mackenzie looks at one of the pictures of the couple that she saw last night in sympathy, noticing the bottom half of the picture is torn clean off.

"...I guess the door didn't take me to the same place this time. I should probably start looking..." Mackenzie starts to talk to herself about her situation, but is suddenly stopped by a gravelly voice screaming, "Who the hell are you?"

Mackenzie jumps and turns around to see a short man. His jet black hair is covering his right eye, his left being a blood red. He has two short red horns protruding from his scalp and a black and red tail that can be seen dragging behind him, occasionally twitching in annoyance. Mackenzie steps back away from the man in fear.

"Listen, I-" Mackenzie starts to try and explain herself, but is once again interrupted by the man groaning.

"I didn't think I would find a teenager in this place."

"...What?" Mackenzie slowly questioned, but the man wasn't listening.

He sighed and said, "Well, I guess it can't be helped, but I can't let you go spilling to whoever you work for."

Mackenzie, now shaking in fear, quietly asks, "Work for? What are you..."

Another groan escapes the man's lips as he says, "Why does everything always happen when I'm on duty."

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about. I won't tell anyone about... whatever this is, so I'm just gonna-" Mackenzie explains as she cautiously walks away from the man, who suddenly holds his hand out and yells, "Freeze, you aren't going anywhere!"

"And you definitely didn't listen to a thing I said," Mackenzie deadpans, "Listen I don't want any trouble, just let me go, and I'll be out of your hair."

“No, I don’t think I will. There’s no guarantee that you won’t blab, so…”

The man places a hand on his belt to pull out the weapon concealed within, which happens to be an ornate dagger. Mackenzie starts to walk backwards, but she trips on a plank of wood, falling on her back. The teen stalks up to her and brings up his dagger to strike Mackenzie.

“Wait, I promise I won’t tell anyone! Please don’t!” Mackenzie screams frantically, bringing her arms up to defend herself. Suddenly, a blinding white light emanates from her hand, blinding the man and pulling him back.

Mackenzie holds her defensive pose until she realizes that she wasn’t hit. She opens her eyes and looks at her hand to see a dagger that’s emanating a blue-green light. Not looking a gift horse in the mouth, Mackenzie quickly gets up and bolts out of the room.

She runs to a door at the other end of the hallway and opens it only to see more people similar to the man lurking around. Mackenzie hides with lightning speed.

“Okay, okay. I just need to get past these guys without being seen. Easy,” she whispers to herself. She looks out from her hiding spot at the room filled with terrifying people once again to see that they are not looking towards her, but instead looking at lights similar to the one she touched yesterday to see that awful memory. She notices a door on the other side of the room and decides to sneak over to it. Hiding in the shadows so as to not be spotted, she creeps towards the door.

Making it to her destination, she quietly opens the door, quickly closing it behind her. Luckily for her, there was nobody in the room. Unluckily, it was a dead end.

“Now what?” Mackenzie questions herself. Looking around the room, she notices there is a singular light orb in the room, seemingly brighter than the other orbs in the other room. As she reaches out to touch it to see what memories they hold, she hears people talking in the other room and decides to listen in instead.

“Hey you!” the man from earlier exclaims, “Did you see anyone run through here?”

“Uh, no boss, I haven’t,” a woman explains, terrified.

“Dammit! If you see anyone, and I do mean anyone, that doesn’t belong to our group, you tell me straight away! Got it?”

“Yes sir!” the woman stutters out.

“Good!”

As Mackenzie hears a door slamming shut, she stops listening in and starts hyperventilating.

“Dammit! How am I supposed to escape?” Mackenzie asks herself, the light orb long forgotten, “I should really ask Devyn for some self-defense training, if I keep getting caught up in these life-threatening situations. Seriously though, how the hell am I supposed to get out of here!”

As Mackenzie yells that, she bangs her hand on the wall. Realizing a little too late, she quickly puts her hands to her mouth, the dagger that’s still in her hands clattering to the ground.

“Did you hear that?” another male voice asked.

“I think it came from that room over there,” the same woman from before says.

“I’ll go check it out.”

Mackenzie began hyperventilating once again. She clumsily picks up her dagger in an attempt to protect herself, not noticing her blond streak glowing once again. The door knob slowly turns and Mackenzie closes her eyes, fearing the worst.

~~~~~

Mackenzie wakes up screaming and hyperventilating, jolting Devyn awake, causing them to fall on the ground. Devyn looks up at Mackenzie with a very annoyed look on their face, saying, "The hell, kid-" but stops when they see the state that Mackenzie is in. They rush to Mackenzie's side, saying, "Hey, you alright, kid?" as they do so.

Mackenzie doesn't reply due to her still hyperventilating, her eyes unfocused and scared. Devyn mutters, "...Shit..." under their breath as they sit on the bed, a bit away from where Mackenzie is still panicking to give her some space and not make her freak out more. They place a hand gently on her foot to ground her, tapping a breathing pattern on her foot.

As Mackenzie starts to calm down, she breathes out, "...Devyn..."

"You with me, kid?" Devyn calmly asks.

"I... I think so..."

"Contact, proximity or space."

As Devyn says that, Mackenzie lunges at them, clutching onto their shirt like a lifeline and begins to bawl. Devyn brings her arms around Mackenzie, rubbing circles on the small of her back. Mackenzie slowly stops crying after a while and starts to breathe normally again.

"You wanna talk about it?" Devyn asks as they break the hug.

"...Not right now. I'll be a-okay, though. Thanks for worrying about me!" Mackenzie says cheerfully.

Devyn scrutinizes Mackenzie, who smiles back at her, though the smile doesn't reach her eyes. Devyn looks on in concern and asks, "Are you sure?"

"Totally! It was just a nightmare anyways. I'll be fine," Mackenzie replies in the same cheery tone.

"You don't sound fine," Devyn retorts, "You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay..." Devyn relents, "Try to get some sleep tonight, though. You do have to deal with your friends bickering all day tomorrow, afterall."

Mackenzie laughs as she says, "Oh come on! It's not that bad!"

"Still, try to get some sleep, okay?"

"Alright, alright. See you in the morning."

Devyn smiles at Mackenzie and walks back to where they were sleeping. Mackenzie smiles softly as she lays back down. She closes her eyes and tries to sleep but she can't. With her brush with certain death and the questions of the memory that she had to leave behind fresh in her mind, there was no way she could go to bed now. With an exasperated sigh, she opens her eyes once again.

"Ugh... there's too many thoughts going in my head to sleep," she whispered to herself.

Mackenzie looks to Devyn, who is now sound asleep. "Lucky," she says with a slight smile on her face. She stands and tip-toes towards her shoes and jacket to put them on. She opens the door and looks towards Devyn once again, contemplating if she should wake them.

"Nah, I'm just leaving to get some fresh air. I'll be fine."

And with that being said, Mackenzie finally leaves the room.

~~~~~  
Walking through the empty streets, Mackenzie sighs happily and says, "There's nothing like a nighttime walk to calm the nerves."

Suddenly, she hears a hard clang in the alleyway next to her. She jumps and looks at the alley cautiously. "Hello... is anyone there?"

When Mackenzie hears no reply, she slowly creeps up to the opening of the alleyway. She looks in to see Karmen and a cat. The cat was happily eating from a metal bowl, Karmen smiling softly at it, crouching near the bowl.

"...Karmen?" Mackenzie questions the other girl. Karmen flinches and quickly gets up into a defensive stance, eyes fiercely trained on Mackenzie. As she sees who was really there, she lets her guard down.

"Oh, thank goodness it's just you!" Karmen exclaims in happiness, hand reaching towards her chest. "Sorry about that. I thought you were... someone else..."

"Someone else? Who're you talking about?" Mackenzie asks skeptically.

"Don't worry about it!" Karmen quickly screams, sheepishly rubbing her arm, "I mean, it's not important."

"...Okay..."

"Heh... Anyways, what brings you here so late into the night?" Karmen asks.

Deciding to take the subject change for now, Mackenzie replies with, "Oh, I just had a nightmare and couldn't fall back to sleep. Decided it was a good idea to take a walk to clear my head."

"Oh? Do you wanna talk about it?" Karmen questioned.

Mackenzie shrugs and says, "Not really. It's kind of a complicated topic, I don't think it would help much to talk about. What about you, though? Why're you here in the middle of the night?"

Suddenly, Karmen clams up again, stuttering out, "Oh... Well... I..." Warning bells start blaring in Mackenzie's head, so much so that it becomes dizzying. *Something's wrong. Something's definitely wrong.* Mackenzie thinks on repeat.

Mackenzie snaps out of her daze and concernedly asks, "Hey, are you... alright?"

"Fine!" Karmen screams, then corrects to, "I mean I'm fine..."

"Are you sure? You seem... different somehow. I mean you were so shy when we saw each other last. Now you're acting like your old self. Seriously, is something wrong?"

"I'm telling you, I'm fine. I just came out to clear my head, like you," Karmen defended, "Now if you'll excuse me, I should be getting home."

And with that, Karmen rushes past Mackenzie and out of sight.

"Weird. Something is definitely going on. I wonder what..." Mackenzie says to herself before shaking her head and saying, "No! If she doesn't want to tell me, then she doesn't have to. I still hope she will though..."

Her thoughts were interrupted by a long yawn and Mackenzie says, "I should be heading home, too."

And with that, Mackenzie walks out of the alleyway and heads home.



## Chapter 4: Strange Meetings

Mackenzie's alarm goes off. Being awake already, this time she quickly silences it. Devyn slowly wakes up, stretching and yawning, only to see Mackenzie already getting ready for the day.

"Wow! Didn't know you had it in you! You actually woke up before your alarm," Devyn jokes.

Mackenzie rolled her eyes and defensively said, "Yeah, well, I had some difficulty getting back to sleep last night, so..."

Devyn, now concerned, commented, "I thought you went to bed right after our conversation last night?"

Mackenzie looks down and stops getting ready. "Wasn't much of a conversation to begin with..."

"You know you could've woke me up right? We could've at least watched some funny cat videos together."

"You looked so comfortable..." Mackenzie laughed, "Besides, aren't you supposed to just know how other people feel? Aren't you who I got it from?"

Devyn shrugs and says, "Nope, you're thinking of Cody. I work as a conscience more than anything."

"...That person in the realm in between that keeps on messing with us?"

"That's the one."

Mackenzie thinks for a bit, but ultimately says, "I guess that kind of makes sense."

"It makes more sense when you see him when he's not bored out of his mind. Stupid higher ups," Devyn muttered, "Anyways, please tell me the next time you're feeling bad. I'm here to help you and keep you safe."

"...I just don't wanna be a bother..." Mackenzie mumbles.

Devyn, hearing the words that Mackenzie wished they didn't, kneels down in front of her, puts a hand on her shoulder, and softly says, "Kid, you're not a bother. It is my job to take care of you, and that means mentally as well as physically. Please, just tell me when something is wrong. Please?"

"...Alright, I promise I'll tell you the next time something goes wrong."

Devyn nods and says, "Good, now get ready! You have to meet your friends soon."

Mackenzie nods sleepily as she walks towards her closet. She picks out a purple t-shirt, gray skirt, and black leggings along with her jacket and combat boots. She pulls a comb through her hair and brushes her teeth. She trudges out the door, Devyn in tow.

As they were waiting outside her apartment complex for the traffic to stop, Devyn asks, "So... any thoughts about what to choose as a subject for the project?"

Yawning, Mackenzie says, "I'm not sure, this town is so interesting! There's a lot of history surrounding it. There are so many options!"

Devyn silently looks forward while placing their hand under their chin. They then reply with, "I guess you're right... just don't get in over your head, okay. Some things... are better left forgotten."

"Why are you acting so ominous all the sudden?"

"It's nothing you should worry about. Besides, trust me on this one. You don't wanna know."

“Guess I’ll just take your word for it, then. But...”

“Oh, look! We can cross now!” Devyn exclaims, a little too eager to leave this conversation. Taking the hint, Mackenzie stops talking and they both cross the street towards a little cafe called *Dream Bean Cafe*.

As Mackenzie opens the door, the bell on top of the door rings. Standing in the doorway, she looks around for her friends.

“Hey Mack! Over here!” Mackenzie hears Mark yell. She looks to her right where her friends were sitting at a booth, except Mark, who was standing, waving his hands like a maniac. Macy was sinking in her chair, trying to look invisible. “...Mark, please calm down...” She groans.

Mackenzie then trains her eyes on Karmen, who was not seeming to notice the commotion the other two were making. *Huh, I didn’t peg her for the ‘not paying attention to her surroundings’ type*. Mackenzie questioned in her head. She decided to file that concern away for later and joined her friends at the booth with a tired smile that didn’t meet her eyes. “Hey guys...”

Macy straightens up in her seat and gives Mackenzie a nod, “Thank god you came over here. I was starting to get tired of the second hand embarrassment. It’s good to see you on time for once.”

Mackenzie nervously laughs and says, “Yeah, I woke up earlier than usual.”

Mark and Macy look at each other with concerned looks. Mark looks back at Mackenzie and opens his mouth to talk, but Mackenzie interrupts him by saying, “Let me get something to drink, then we can talk about the project, okay?”

Macy looks at Mark and shakes her head, stopping him from saying anything more. “...Okay...” she replies back.

Mackenzie walks over to the short line to order her drink. The person in front of her finishes her order and Mackenzie steps towards the cashier.

“Welcome to Dream Bean Cafe. What do you want to order,” the cashier says unenthusiastically.

Mackenzie looks at her for a bit and tiredly orders, “Can I get a large black coffee with two shots of espresso, please,”

The cashier looks to Mackenzie in concern and says, “That’s a lot of caffeine kid, you doing okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.” The cashier looks at her again and quietly rings her up.

“That’ll be four dollars and fifty cents.”

Mackenzie pulls out her credit card and pays for her drink.

“What’s your name, kid?” the cashier asks.

“It’s Mackenzie.”

“Alright Mackenzie, your drink will be done within a couple of minutes.”

Mackenzie nods and steps out of the line to the side where she waits for her drink.

“Mackenzie!” a cheery barista with short purple hair calls out for her. Mackenzie walks towards the barista.

“Here’s your drink!”

Mackenzie takes her drink and tiredly says, “Thank you.”

The Barista smiles genuinely and says, “Have a great day! Please come by again!”

Mackenzie nods and walks back to the booth. She sits down next to Karmen and asks, "So... does anyone have an idea on what we should do for our project?"

Macy looks at Mackenzie incredulously and says, "Listen, just because I let you off the hook so you can get some coffee, doesn't mean we're not talking about your sleep issues."

"After we figure out what we're gonna do. I still need to drink my caffeine before I can go to any... emotional conversations."

"I guess you're right, but we are talking about this later."

Mackenzie laughs uncomfortably and sips her coffee. She nods slowly, in which Macy smiles in reply.

"Anyways, has anyone got an idea?" Macy asks.

"Well we could..." Mark starts talking, but is interrupted by Karmen, who suddenly becomes interested in the conversation, saying, "We should totally investigate that creepy old mansion."

Mackenzie, Macy and Mark quickly turn to Karmen. Mark was angry that he was interrupted and Macy went rigid and started to turn pale. Mackenzie was rapidly looking between the three of them, trying desperately to find a way to de-escalate the situation. Mackenzie's eyes finally stopped on Macy, who now looked sick.

Now incredibly concerned about her friend, Mackenzie hesitantly asked, "Um... why do you think we should look into that creepy place?"

Karmen excitedly exclaimed, "Think about it! If we solved a murder mystery that even the cops couldn't solve, we'd get an A for sure! Besides, rumor has it that the place is haunted. Isn't that awesome!"

Macy's fearful expression then became worse. She looks like she's seen a ghost and is getting increasingly less comfortable about the conversation. Mackenzie looks to Mark, who looks back with concern in his eyes. He then says, "That's... uh... an interesting idea, Karmen. Maybe we should think of some other options, though. You know, so we don't put too many eggs in one basket?"

Macy and Mackenzie sigh in relief simultaneously as Karmen says, "Whatever, no one will find another option better than that anyway. You guys are just being scaredy cats."

*That was unexpectedly childish. She seemed more mature than that.* Mackenzie thought to herself. She looks back at Karmen, who is now sporting a smug look on her face. Suddenly warning bells blare in her mind once again and looks more closely at Karmen. Upon further inspection, she sees black wisps emanating from her body. Mackenzie recognizes those wisps from when she first met Devyn, though those were more pronounced. *I should run this by Devyn after the meeting.* Mackenzie thinks. With that thought in the back of her mind, she joins the others in trying to find another idea for their project.

"Hm... Well, all the options that I'm thinking of are the ones that everybody is going to try and pick. I'm pretty sure most of them are snatched up by this point..." Mackenzie explains, trailing off at the end.

Mark sighed and said, "I know what you mean. I already reached out to the other groups. All my ideas are already taken..."

"Seriously Mark, again," Macy dead panned, but you could tell that her heart wasn't in it. She was just looking for some normalcy.

Mark, seemingly seeing this, remarked with, "I have more friends than just you two, you know. Anyways, it looks like we have no choice but to choose the old mansion."

Mackenzie looked at Macy and concernedly asked, "Mace, You okay with this?"

Macy looks down at her hands, eyebrows knit together as she says, "Well, if this is our only option..."

"Look Mace, if you're not comfortable with this, we can always come back to this topic when we have more information," Mark reassures.

Macy looks up at Mark determinedly and states, "No. Thank you, but like everyone said, this is our only option. I'll be fine."

"You one hundred percent sure, Mace?" Mackenzie asked.

"...Yeah, I'm sure," Macy responds with a little bit of hesitation.

"Well... if you're sure... at least we don't have to actually search that creepy place for a while. We can save that for the last month of our project. We can just do the research on the place through word of mouth until then," Mark explains.

"Sounds like a plan to me!" Mackenzie cheerfully exclaims.

Macy nods and looks down at the table, lost in thought. Mark and Mackenzie look at each other and then Mark claps his hands together and exclaims, "Well, that should be all we needed for today! We should head back and calm down before we do anything else with the project."

"...Whatever," Karmen says as she leaves for the bathroom. All three of the other occupants of the table watch her from behind.

"Well, that was weird," Mark says, breaking the awkward silence.

"...Yeah..." Mackenzie replies.

"...Well, I guess I'll see you guys later then?" Macy asks, standing up a little shakily.

"...Yeah..." Mackenzie says once again, eyes not leaving the bathroom door.

Macy bolts through the door, leaving Mark and Mackenzie shocked at what has happened. After a few seconds of silence, Mark concernedly says, "...I'm gonna check on Mace and see that she gets home safe."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I'm gonna leave in a bit, myself. Call or text if something comes up, yeah?"

"Of course," Mark responds while getting up and leaves to follow Macy. Mackenzie sips her drink and Devyn sits next to her.

"Well, that was a shitshow," Devyn snarkily says.

"You think," Mackenzie snaps back.

"Watch your attitude. I swear, I like it better when you have a good night's rest, even if you're late all the time."

"Sorry," Mackenzie says as she looks at her drink, "I'm just worried about Karmen and Macy..."

Devyn sighs and says, "I know what you mean. Something definitely wasn't... right with that conversation."

"Hey Devyn, do you remember that guy from when we first met?" Mackenzie asks.

"Yeah, I do. The guy who got possessed, right?"

"Yeah, that guy. Well, I noticed the same black tendrils emanating off of Karmen."

"Oh, you sensed it too huh?"

“More like I saw it, but yeah. There’s something going on, but I don’t know what it is...”

Devyn shrugged and said, “You’re much more empathetic than I am. I did sense a small amount of unease... started about right when we entered the cafe. Most possessions happen when strong negative emotions occur, so something must’ve happened...”

“She felt really agitated last night as well, but she was acting at least relatively normal. I felt the same ominous feeling then too. Like something was gonna hurt us, but nothing happened,” Mackenzie explained.

“Wait, what do you mean last night?” Devyn questioned.

“Well...” Mackenzie started explaining, but was interrupted by Devyn saying, “Huh? The weird feeling disappeared...”

“What do you mean?”

“Mackenzie?” Karmen says from behind Mackenzie.

“Speak of the devil and she shall appear.” Mackenzie glares at Devyn and looks back at Karmen.

“What do you need, Karmen?”

“This is the correct meeting spot... right?” Karmen manages to squeak out.

Mackenzie looks at Devyn in disbelief. “Is she serious right now?” Devyn asked.

Mackenzie looks back to Karmen and explains, “The meeting already ended. You were there. We chose the creepy old mansion upon your request.”

“What? I don’t remember any of that,” Karmen responded, “I was gonna suggest the town hall mystery. I looked at that place, but to be honest, it creeped me out.”

“Well, it’s too late to back out now,” Mackenzie says, “Besides, according to Mark, that one was already taken by Ally’s group.”

“Oh... Well, I’ll see you around then?”

Mackenzie nods and says, “Sure.” Karmen smiles shyly and leaves the cafe.

“Now that was weird,” Devyn remarks.

“Yeah, she didn’t remember anything... have you seen anything like this?” Mackenzie asks.

“No. I’ve never been there long enough to see the after effects of a possession before. I do know that Cody has, as he’s been dealing with possessions behind the scenes with his partner. I’ll see if I can figure out something tonight.”

“Okay, I’ll confront Karmen to see if I can help her in the meantime.”

“How’re you gonna do that? You don’t even know her home address.”

“I know I don’t know her address, Devyn. I do, however, think I know where to find her,” Mackenzie determinedly replies.

“Does this have anything to do with what happened last night?” Devyn questioned.

“Kind of, but let’s not get into the specifics right now. All you need to know for now is that she goes to a specific location when distressed... I think.”

“That’s reassuring,” Devyn dead pans.

“It’s the best direction we got. Right now we need answers.”

Devyn sighs and says, “I guess you’re right. You will tell me what happened at some point, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I promise I’ll tell you tonight after we get our information.”

“...Fine...”

After a long silence, Mackenzie suddenly says, "...I think this will be more than just a group project."

"...Yeah..." Both Devyn and Mackenzie look towards where Karmen left in concern.

~~~~~  
Karmen is walking on the sidewalk to her usual hiding spot, thoughts circling in her head. *I wonder what happened today. All I remember is hearing a voice... Then I was in the bathroom of a cafe.* Karmen stops walking and groans as she yells, "Why does all the bad stuff have to happen to me!"

Karmen hears someone clearing their throat to her right. Karmen jumps back away from the alleyway she was going to make her way into and turns to see Mackenzie in the entrance of the alleyway, staring at her with a concerned expression on her face.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you..."

"Hey Mackenzie. It's alright... but what are you doing here?"

"Well I thought you would come this way after everything that happened today, so..."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I want to believe you, Karmen, but I don't. It is true that you acted like a different person, but..." Mackenzie started, but Karmen interrupted by saying, "What? What are you talking about?"

Now getting irritated with Karmen, Mackenzie folds her arms and explains to her, "Um, the meeting that we were both in. Seriously Karmen, you acted like a self-centered jerk there. It isn't like you at all from what I can tell. Honestly, I'm worried about you. Seriously, something has to be going on, so what is it? What is happening to you?"

"Nothing is going on..." Karmen tries to explain, but is interrupted by Mackenzie screaming, "Bullshit!"

Karmen flinches back away from Mackenzie, looking towards the exit. Mackenzie calms down seeing her friend's distress, and realizing she did this, she cautiously approaches the scared teen and softly says, "...Karmen? Are you alright?"

Karmen folds her arms over her chest and shuffles away from her friend's soft touch, causing Mackenzie to back off and give her some space.

"It's none of your business, so please, just stay out of this," Karmen pleads.

"Okay, I won't pry. Can you at least tell me if you're safe?" Karmen flinches again at Mackenzie's question.

"I... I... I gotta go!" Karmen exclaims as she runs out of the alleyway. Mackenzie tries to stop her with her hand, screaming, "Wait!" Her hand narrowly misses Karmen's wrist and Karmen escapes, leaving Mackenzie alone in the alleyway.

"Maybe I pushed a little too far..." Mackenzie ponders to herself, "With that reaction, it's safe to assume that she isn't safe, but there's nothing I can do if she doesn't open up to me. I should apologize when I have the chance." Head hanging low, Mackenzie trudges her way out of the alleyway.

~~~~~  
As Mackenzie walks into her bedroom, she notices Devyn leaning on the wall next to her.

"So, how'd it go?" they asked.

"I found her, if that's what you're asking."

“And you found out what was wrong?”

“Well...no, I didn't. All I got is that she doesn't feel safe in the situation she's in. I was a little bit too heavy-handed in my response and scared her off. It was more like telling me things through an omission of information.”

“Oof, that's rough. So, where did you find her, anyways?” Devyn asked.

“Right, I was supposed to tell you what happened last night,” Mackenzie exclaimed, “Well, after you went back to sleep, I just couldn't. Thought I would take a midnight stroll to take my mind off of things.”

“What things? And kid, that is way too dangerous, especially for a girl your age.”

“I know, I know. Anyways, there was a clanging sound in the alleyway, so I went to check it out. It turned out to be Karmen. I assumed that this was her usual hang out spot, so I decided to confront her there. Didn't turn out too well, though,” Mackenzie explained.

Devyn sighed and said, “Well, I guess your reckless nature is good for some things. So what are you gonna do now that she's afraid of you?”

“Thanks for rubbing salt in the wound,” Mackenzie snarked, “But in all honesty, all I can do is apologize and give her some space. Hopefully that'll get her to trust me more, but if it doesn't then that's fine as well. All I want is for her to feel comfortable.”

“Good, that's gonna go a long way. There's definitely something up, especially if your deduction of her not feeling safe is true. Unfortunately, we can't force another person to face their demons.”

“Yeah, you're right. So how'd things go on your end?” Mackenzie asked.

“It went well! Cody gave me a lot of information,” Devyn explained, “Turns out that we were right, this is a normal thing that happens with possessions. Everyone that has been possessed has only mentioned hearing a voice and waking up in a random place that they didn't even remember going to.”

“Well, it's a good thing that Karmen isn't the only one. That puts my mind at ease.”

“Yeah, it makes me feel better about the situation as well. Now let's get to bed. It's getting late.”

Mackenzie nods and turns to put on her pajamas. She gets into bed and goes to bed, where she finds herself dreaming of a white void once again.

“Oh, you're here once again?” Cody asks.

“Yeah, it looks like I go here every time I sleep.”

“Oh, that's a bit of an issue. There's nothing for me to show you today. I guess you can stay and hang out with me. Wanna play a card game?” Cody says, bringing out a pack of cards.

“You know what, sure. Definitely beats sitting here in a white void.” She sits down in front of Cody and starts playing a game of go fish, waiting for morning to come.

## Chapter 5: Apology

It was next Monday when Mackenzie tried to apologize to Karmen. "Hey, Karmen. Can we talk?"

"Um..." as Karmen starts talking, the bell rings. She sighs and says, "Sorry, I have my math class right now. I have to go." And with that, Karmen bolted in the direction of her classroom. As Karmen leaves, Mark comes up behind Mackenzie.

"She does know you have the same class, right? Mark asks, causing Mackenzie to jump.

"Geez Mark, you scared me!" Mackenzie said as she playfully hit Mark on the arm, "and obviously not. This is her first Monday here, after all."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense. Still, she was in quite the hurry. Did anything happen?"

Mackenzie sighed and while rubbing the back of her head, said, "I just spooked her a bit two nights ago... might have pushed a little too hard while trying to get answers from her about what happened that morning..."

"I see... well, you gonna apologize to her? Remember, she is a bit skittish."

"Yeah, that's what I was trying to do just then... maybe I need to be more gentle in my approach..."

Mark shrugged and said, "Wouldn't hurt. Anyways, we should get going. Don't wanna be late for math class."

"Yeah, let's go," Mackenzie said as they both walked towards the classroom together.

~~~~~

It has been th4ree days since the first attempt at an apology, and Mackenzie still couldn't get Karmen to talk to her. Mackenzie was walking through the streets, her head hung low and her brows crinkling in thought. *I wonder what happened to her. In the past few days, she was acting even more distant than the first day, even to the other members of our group. I understand me as I was the one who scared her, and hell I haven't even got the chance to apologize yet, but everyone else as well? I do hope she's alright...*

Suddenly, Mackenzie's internal monologue was stopped by her hearing someone crying in the alleyway. She walks towards the crying to see Karmen in hysterics. Mackenzie slowly approaches Karmen and asks, "Karmen, are you alright?"

Karmen flinches back and hangs her head. Mackenzie walks towards her and gently takes a seat next to her. Karmen still wasn't looking at her. After a small sigh, Mackenzie says, "Look, I'm sorry about what happened that last time we spoke one on one. I was just... worried. Maybe I pushed too hard, but I just... feel that something's wrong, and you sort of implied that you aren't safe, I just don't know what's going on exactly. It's hard to see someone I consider a friend like that... and being powerless to stop it, it just hurts even more."

"I told you, I'm..." Karmen started saying, but was interrupted by Mackenzie saying, "Don't give me that, especially when you were in hysterics just a couple of minutes ago. Now what's wrong? Maybe I can help."

"You can't help with this... believe me."

"Maybe not, but sometimes just talking about it to someone is more than enough," Mackenzie explained.

"It's just a family matter. I'd rather if you're not involved with my shit," Karmen states back.

"I won't do anything rash, I promise," Mackenzie says.



Karmen giggles and says, "Somehow, I don't believe that... But okay. It's not like I have the energy to run away right now." With a sigh, Karmen starts to explain her situation by saying, "My parents have just been a little snippy with me these past few weeks since we've returned. You know how you recognized that I wasn't acting like myself in our first meeting... Well, you weren't wrong. I use that facade to seem unassuming to others... Even my parents. That's why I came out there. It's the one place where I can be myself."

"Oh... I'm so sorry. Why do you act like yourself when you're around me?"

"Well, first because you have this ability to read people, so it isn't really worth it to, but also... I trust that you won't hurt me, at least not intentionally."

Mackenzie cringed back and said, "Sorry."

Karmen laughed and said, "It's fine... You were right though. Talking about it did make things feel a little more manageable."

Mackenzie smiles and says, "Happy to help."

"Look, I have to go," Karmen says while standing up, "But thanks for cheering me up."

Karmen walks out of the alleyway, Mackenzie waving her off with a, "See you later, Karmen!"

Karmen pauses and nods before resuming her walk back home, leaving Mackenzie alone once again in the alleyway. With a sigh, Mackenzie says to herself, "That isn't the full story, I'm sure of it... but at least she opened up a little. That's enough for right now. All I can do now is be her friend!"

Just as Mackenzie says this, she feels like something opened up in her mind, like a door to new knowledge was finally unlocked. Suddenly, a bright light emanated from her right hand, splitting into four colored balls of light, one yellow, one green, one blue, and one pink. Mackenzie watched as the balls of light danced in the alleyway until, one by one, they all zoomed towards her open palm, making the light in her hand so bright that she had to shield her eyes from the brightness. Once the light disappeared, she saw a card, the fool, with Karmen's face on it, her eyes closed. Mackenzie smiles and pockets the card.

"Guess I have something to ask Devyn about. She's very knowledgeable about this stuff." As Mackenzie says that, she walks out of the alleyway and towards her home, excited to figure out what just happened.

## Chapter 6: Training

Devyn was pacing back and forth, waiting for Mackenzie to return. She left to clear her head about what was going on with Karmen hours ago, and still isn't back yet.

"Where could she be? Is she alright?" Devyn questions to herself, "Maybe I should go look for her."

Just as they turned towards the door to leave to look for Mackenzie, the door slammed open, causing them to jump in alarm. They went into a fighting stance only to see Mackenzie with a giant smile on her face.

"You wouldn't believe what just happened!" Mackenzie yelled enthusiastically.

Devyn sighed in relief and chuckled as they said, "Woah kid, calm down."

That seemed to do the trick as Mackenzie sheepishly looked down and said, "Sorry..."

The smile that crossed Devyn's lips could not be contained as she asked, "So, what did you want to tell me?"

"OH! You know how Karmen and I have been a little... distant from each other the past few days?"

"Yeah, I remember. Kind of hard to miss. She avoided you like the plague."

"Right, and everyone else too. Well, when I was on my walk, I saw her. She was extremely distressed. Then we got to talking, she told me some of what is going on, and when she left, this card appeared out of nowhere and it felt like something opened up in my brain," Mackenzie explained as she pulled the card out of her pocket.

Devyn took the card and inspected it thoroughly. They then gasp as they exclaimed, "This is a tarot card!"

"A what card?" Mackenzie questions.

Devyn looks at Mackenzie in shock and asks, "You've been interacting with the spirit realm all this time and haven't heard about tarot cards?"

Mackenzie shakes her head and folds her arms across her chest, saying, "If anyone would've taught me about this kind of thing, it would've been you."

Devyn rubs the back of their head and explains, "Well, tarot cards are gateways to the spirit realm. You said this card just appeared out of thin air, correct?"

"Yeah, after I finished talking with Karmen."

"Huh... keep this close. I think it is important for our investigation. Now for the brain opening part, it might've had something to do with my realm."

"Really? What do you mean?"

"Think about it. My realm is the realm of memories, or the realm in between the human realm and the spirit realm. You're somehow connected to it in some way, if the fact that you go there every time you sleep is any indication. I think whatever happened to you, it was actually happening in my realm."

Mackenzie sighs and says, "That makes sense, so I need to go back to that place to get some answers?"

"Pretty much, but you're not going back there without being fully prepared," Devyn says.

"What do you mean?" Mackenzie asks, but only gets a smirk in return.

~~~~~

Devyn was excitedly pattering around, pushing furniture around Mackenzie's living room.

"Uh... what're you doing to my living room?" Mackenzie asks incredulously.

“Well, I know that you want to go back into the realm of memories to see what’s going on, so I thought I would teach you how to fight,” Devyn explained happily.

“Huh, I guess great minds think alike,” Mackenzie says, shuffling her feet, “I was gonna ask you the same thing. I was honestly kind of worried you would say no, but I guess I was worried for nothing. You seem very eager to teach me to fight.

Devyn looked up, shocked and asked, “Why wouldn’t I want to teach you to defend yourself?”

“Well, you seem very overprotective of me, so I thought you’d be against it. Probably because you’d think I would go looking for trouble if you taught me,” Mackenzie explains.

Devyn looked at Mackenzie with a sympathetic smile and said, “Kid... of course I’d teach you how to fight. I may be a bit overprotective at times, but what better way to ensure your safety than to make sure you could save yourself if the situation calls for it.”

“...I guess that makes sense,” Mackenzie says sheepishly.

“Great! Now help me move the couch. We need as much room as possible for this.”

“Okay!” Mackenzie exclaimed in determination as she moved to the other side of the couch.

~~~~~

After the room got set up, the girl and the spirit stood in the center of the room.

“Alright, first we need to equip you with a weapon...” Devyn starts to explain, but is interrupted by Mackenzie sheepishly saying, “Actually in that realm, I do have a weapon.”

“Wait what? When did this happen?”

“The time before the last time I went into the realm of memories. You remember the panic attack before that strange group project meeting,” Mackenzie explained.

“Oh, I guess it makes sense why I didn’t hear about this till now. A lot of things happened during that time. Next time something like this happens, tell me, okay.”

Mackenzie nods and says, “Okay, I will. So what’s the next step?”

“Well, because you already have a weapon, I’ll need to know what type of weapon it is so I can properly train you for it.”

“It was a dagger,” Mackenzie simply stated.

“Alright, Cody is good with weapons, so he’ll be able to help you with your dagger when needed. He’ll probably be able to upgrade your weapon as well, so make sure you talk to him about it when you’re ready.”

Mackenzie nods her head.

“Great, now I’ll give you a practice dagger so we can train your moves with your weapon of choice.”

With that statement, Devyn swipes the air, and a wooden dagger appears out of thin air.

“Woah,” Mackenzie whispers in astonishment.

“Here you go, now the most important part of a fight is making sure you’ve got the upper hand, which can be achieved by the stance you use and paying attention to your opponent. Keeping a stance will help you keep your balance, so show me your fighting stance.”

With that sentence, Mackenzie crouched down and placed her hand in front of her, the wooden dagger pointed to Devyn. Devyn inspects Mackenzie’s stance and says, “Not bad for a beginner. I would suggest putting your feet further apart from each other, it’ll help you keep your balance more.”

Mackenzie corrected, which made Devyn nod in response.

“Alright, perfect! The next thing we’ll do is teach you some basic fighting techniques then we’ll spar. You ready?”

Mackenzie nods and determinedly exclaims, “Let’s do this!”

~~~~~

“Oof!” Mackenzie yells as her back meets the carpet for the tenth time.

“Not bad. I think you’re ready.”

“What? But I didn’t beat you, even once.”

“Kid, I’m a professional when it comes to fighting. I never expected you to actually beat me. You’re a novice, after all. You do show some real promise, and that’s why you’re ready. You even got the jump on me a couple of times. That’s hard to do,” Devyn explained, hands firmly placed on their hips.

Mackenzie blushes and sheepishly mumbles, “Thank you…”

Devyn smiles and says, “You’re welcome, kid. Now, when do you think you’re planning to go back into my realm?”

Mackenzie looks up to Devyn, determination filling her eyes and a devilish smirk gracing her lips as she confidently states, “Tonight.”

“…Are you sure?” Devyn questions.

“Positive,” Mackenzie calmly says as she nods her head, “The faster I get to the bottom of this, the faster I can help Karmen.”

“Okay, just don’t overdo it. Remember to pace yourself.”

Mackenzie simply nods and starts to put the room back together.

## Chapter 7: Karmen's Past

Mackenzie was sitting in her bed, Devyn hovering over her.

"Alright, I should be able to at least communicate with you from here. It might take me a while to get to you if something goes wrong, though. Cody will be there to help you... though I don't know how much help he'll be..." Devyn explains.

"Yeah, he keeps saying how he'll have some fun with this situation, but hasn't really given me any real indication of what that will entail, yet. Don't worry about it, though. I'll figure something out. Like you said, I show promise in fighting, so I can lean on that if I have to. And who knows, maybe something new will happen because I'm in danger. That's what happened last time after all," Mackenzie says, shrugging off Devyn's worry.

"...You really need to tell me that story someday," Devyn deadpanned.

"I will after I get back."

And with that, Mackenzie closes her eyes and tries to fall asleep.

~~~~~  
When Mackenzie wakes up once again, she is in the realm in between, Cody leaning at the table he's usually next to.

"Wow, back so soon. You must really like me," Cody joked.

"First of all, you know as well as I do that I can't control coming here. Second, I don't have time for your jokes right now. I assume you actually know why I'm here, so what door do I have to go through to make sure I can get the information I need on Karmen?" Mackenzie shot Cody down.

"Oh, you must mean the door behind me. Yeah, the memories themselves are unlocked, but someone put an extra lock on the core memory."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope, all the other doors aren't protected, though. You might find some clues to the lock in those memories. Here, let me open them up for you."

With that statement, Cody snapped his fingers and the other doors around the area were shown in four colored lights, the ones that Mackenzie saw when she gained the tarot card. When the lights dissipated, the rest of the doors turned into portals with trees surrounding it.

"Well, that's new."

"Yeah, I don't have any control on how everything manifests here, as I'm just a stand in for Devyn, but I can still do that neat trick."

"...I thought you were gonna mess with me throughout this whole process..."

Cody shrugs his shoulders and says, "Eh, you already have too much on your plate. Besides, I still get to have my fun. I get to see you flounder to find the answer to the lock after all."

"Wow, that's very comforting," Mackenzie sarcastically says.

Cody shrugs his shoulders once again and goes back to what he was apparently doing before, which was creating some kind of weapon. Mackenzie faces towards the first portal, which has a blue aura surrounding it.

"Hey kid! Can you hear me?" Mackenzie hears Devyn say in her head.

"Yup, hear you loud and clear, Dev," Mackenzie responds.

"Good, do you have your dagger?"

Mackenzie was about to say no when a bright light distracts her. When the light disappears, she sees the same dagger that appeared the last time.

"Kid? You alright?" Devyn asks concernedly.

Mackenzie shakes the shock off and says, "I'm fine, and I do have my dagger."

"Good, now did Cody show you the way to proceed?"

"Yeah, but I have to go through some trials to get the answers I seek."

Devyn sighs, "Let me guess... this was orchestrated by Cody wasn't it."

"Surprisingly no, there's just a blockade to the core memory and I have to find a way to get past it. I'm standing next to the first portal now."

"Alright, let's go through it."

Mackenzie nods and walks through the first portal.

~~~~~

When Mackenzie reaches the other side of the portal, she finds herself on a familiar pathway.

"Hey, I remember this place! It's where Karmen and I first met! We used to hang out together all the time here!" Mackenzie exclaimed.

"Huh? I wonder why this memory is in this place?"

Mackenzie was about to speak when she saw an ominous person coming her way. She quickly hid behind a crate. The ominous man walked past her and stops a little bit away from where she was hiding.

"...I swear I heard something over here... must've been my imagination," the ominous man states as he walks away.

"Dammit, more ominous people?" Mackenzie growls.

"Must be demons. If they're in my domain, then something is definitely wrong. You should try and sneak past them for now," Devyn explains.

Mackenzie nods and stealthily makes her way through the maze that was this version of her childhood playground. After sneaking around for a long time, they finally reach a blue orb, with a demon wearing a pencil skirt, dress shirt, and high heels standing next to it. Underneath her glasses, the demon had blood red eyes like the rest of them. She was dutifully writing something down on a notepad, not noticing the other person in the room. Suddenly, her com flashed green.

The demon groaned and answered, "What do you want? Don't you know I'm busy with my research?"

"Sorry ma'am," the demon on the other end said, "I just wanted to inform you that there is a disturbance. An unidentified person has been sneaking around. We don't know where she is now as we just saw her on the security footage."

Mackenzie wants to slap herself for thinking that she was safe. The researcher demon groaned, but then smirked and said, "Alright, I'll keep a lookout. Doubt they're strong enough to get past me, anyways. They are taking the cowardly way out and hiding after all."

This statement ticked Mackenzie off. She knew she was strong and she was going to prove it to this demon.

"Who the hell do you think you're talking about! I'll take you down right here and now!" Mackenzie yells as she jumps out of her hiding spot.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the intruder. I thought my tactic would work. Now all I have to do is take you down myself.”

With that statement, Mackenzie slips into her battle stance and assesses the situation. She runs towards her opponent and slashes at her. The dagger went right through her as if she wasn’t there to begin with, but when she strikes back, pain shoots through Mackenzie.

*Shit. What have I gotten myself into?* Mackenzie asks herself.

“Kid? Are you alright?”

“Devyn, oh god, I’m so glad to hear your voice. I’m stuck in a bit of a situation. Is there any way you can get over here and help?”

“Okay, kid. I’m on my way. Try to stall until I get there,” Devyn replies.

Mackenzie nods and looks back to her opponent.

“Who the hell are you talking to in the middle of a battle? Are you so naive to think you can get reinforcement?” the demon laughed, “Even if you did, I’d be done with you before they came.”

“Don’t count on it,” Mackenzie snarkily replied.

This makes the demon growl and lunge at Mackenzie. Mackenzie quickly dodges out of the way, which makes the woman stumble. *Good, all I have to do is stall until Devyn gets here. Dodging and guarding is my best bet.* Mackenzie thinks. The Demon tries to swipe at her, but she keeps on dodging and evading and guarding. Mackenzie gets a few scrapes and bruises, but nothing that can’t be fixed with a band-aid or two.

“Hey, mind if I tap in,” they both hear a voice say behind them.

“Shit, reinforcements have arrived,” the demon says as she turns towards Devyn, reeling in shock when she sees them, “...Double shit.”

Devyn lands right next to Mackenzie and confidently states, “Alright kid, now is the time to tell you how to really deal with demons.”

With that statement, the demon is now shaking in her heels.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Mackenzie replies with a smirk on her face.

Devyn quickly zooms right through the demon and lands next to Mackenzie once again.

“Okay, you can hit her now.”

Mackenzie runs up to the demon and slashes at them, and it connects. The demon groans and looks up at the two opponents.

“Guess you win. This wasn’t worth my time anyways,” the demon says as she creates a portal and walks through it. Both Devyn and Mackenzie sighed.

“How’d you do that?” Mackenzie asked.

Devyn shrugs and says, “It’s just a thing that spirits can do. It’s how we handle possessions as well.”

“Oh, so I can’t do so on my own,” Mackenzie stated.

“No worries, kid. If you need me, you just have to call my name, I’ll come.”

Mackenzie smiles at this. “Thanks, Devyn.”

Devyn nods and says, “So, are we gonna see what that blue light is or what?”

They both look at the blue orb of light, then at each other. Mackenzie slowly approaches the orb and touches it. The orb shines brightly for a few seconds, and when the light fades, a scene plays before them. A younger Karmen is crying in the park, all scratched up. No one is coming to help the crying child, that is until a young Mackenzie walks up to her.

“Hey, you alright?” the young Mackenzie asks, tilting her head like a lost puppy.

The girl flinches back and looks towards the young Mackenzie. “You look a little banged up. Want some help?” the young Mackenzie asks once again. Young Karmen looks down and back up at young Mackenzie and slowly nods her head. Young Mackenzie kneels down in front of Karmen as the memory fades.

“Oh, I remember this! This is when Karmen and I first became friends!” Mackenzie exclaimed.

“Huh, looks like we’ll be seeing some clips of your friendship in these memory orbs.”

“Maybe...” Mackenzie says, “It doesn’t matter now, look.”

The number 4 is now shining brightly in the blue orb.

“Huh, the number might be important, so remember it. We’ll talk to Cody once we get back to the hub.”

And with that, both of them walk back to where Cody is waiting for them, not noticing the figure watching them.

~~~~~

They come through the portal once again, Cody greeting them as they do. “Hey, how’d it go?”

“Well, we found a clue. Had to fight, though,” Mackenzie explained.

“Really? What’s the clue?” Cody asked.

“We found the number 4 on the memory,” Devyn interjected.

Cody thinks on this information for a little while, “Yeah, that makes sense, the lock is number based, after all.”

“Thanks for telling us that sooner,” Mackenzie sarcastically says.

Cody shrugs his shoulders and says, “It slipped my mind. Anywho, you should look at the other memories just in case. There might be other numbers in the other memories as well. I’ll keep track of the numbers you do find.”

Mackenzie nods and turns to Devyn and says, “I think I can go this alone. I’ll tell you if I get in trouble again.”

Devyn nods back and says, “Good luck, kid. Holler if you need me.”

Mackenzie looks towards the next portal, this one is made of brick and the portal itself is green.

“Welp, here I go,” Mackenzie says to herself as she walks into the portal.

~~~~~

As Mackenzie makes it to the other side, she sees a woman demon pacing back and forth and wringing her hands. Mackenzie quickly hides.

“Why did they have to send me to look for the intruder? I’m only the secretary,” the demon bemoaned.

*Shit, how am I supposed to get past her?* Mackenzie thinks. She looks around for anything that she can distract the demon with, and she sees a bit of scrap metal on the other side of the room they are in. *There! I have to get over there without her seeing me. Guess it’s time to go into stealth mode.* Mackenzie says in her head.

Once the demon was turned around, Mackenzie sneaks out of her hiding spot and sneaks to the other side of the room. The demon secretary looked back a couple of times, but there was another cover, so Mackenzie slipped by her easily. When she makes it to the sheet



metal, she picks it up and throws it in the other direction. The demon jumps and shakily asks, "Who's there?" She slowly goes towards the noise and Mackenzie stealthily bolts to the exit of the room.

"Whew, that was a close one," Mackenzie says once she gets far enough away, "Now to dodge the rest of these demons." With stealth and precision, Mackenzie makes it to the next memory orb, but there was another researcher demon next to this one as well. *Dammit! But maybe if I calm down this time, the demon might just go away.* Mackenzie thinks.

"Ugh, what a pain. All this fuss about a weak child," the demon groans as another demon walks besides her.

"They did take out that other demon. Besides, this is the boss's orders. Maybe they are more formidable than you think," the other demon says.

The researcher demon grumbles and says, "Highly doubtful. You know how the boss is, always looking for attention. I bet that demon was weak, anyways. There's no way that child is good at any of this, especially fighting."

Mackenzie wants to go out there and show them wrong so bad, but she holds her tongue.

The other demon then states, "We should look elsewhere. There's no reason to stay here if the child isn't here."

The researcher demon sighs and says, "I guess you're right. If our intel is correct, then they would've come out by now. Let's go."

And with that, the two demons leave the room, leaving Mackenzie and the memory orb.

"Huh, I guess waiting worked, but man, that was a close call. I almost blew my cover," Mackenzie says as she reaches out to the orb. In a flash of light, the next scene plays. It was a school day and the teacher was handing out tests. Karmen's test was given to her and she looked scared.

"Oh no, my mom's gonna kill me," the younger Karmen said. The younger Mackenzie placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "It isn't that bad. Next time, you'll get a good grade for sure. I'll even tutor you if you want."

Karmen smiles and says, "Thanks, Mack. You're a good friend." Mackenzie smiles back and the scene ends.

"I've always wondered why she was so scared. Well, I guess I'll figure it out at some point."

Mackenzie then sees the number 7 on the memory orb. "Alright! Another number! Now to go tell Cody my findings!"

And with that thought, Mackenzie walks away from the memory orb and towards the main hub.

~~~~~

The last two orbs were easy. Mackenzie dodged almost all the demons. She got herself into a few battles by accident, but with Devyn by her side, they made quick work of them. She was calm enough to not straight up attack the researcher demons for bad mouthing her time and time again, and the memories were interesting. One was the time they found a stray cat on the side of the road. "My mom would never allow me to keep it," Karmen had said sadly. "It's okay, I'll keep it, and you can see it any time you want," Mackenzie said to cheer Karmen up, which worked.

The last memory was that of her alone in her room. Mackenzie had decided to sneak into the house and have some fun since Karmen was grounded. For what, Karmen and Mackenzie didn't know. It confused Mackenzie to no end, but she decided to go and cheer Karmen up regardless. Karmen had been super appreciative that day. The numbers on the orbs were two and three.

Back in the hub, Mackenzie was talking to Cody about the next steps. "Alright, how do I crack the code?"

"Beats me. My best guess is that the numbers you found correlate to the numbers on the lock. We just need to figure out the right combination."

"Alright, let's take a crack at it," Mackenzie determinedly exclaimed. It took a while for Mackenzie to find the right code, but when she did, a white portal opened up that looked similar to the blue one, but white.

"Alright, no turning back now. You ready?" Cody asked.

Mackenzie looks up at Cody with a determined glint in her eyes and nods. "Let's do this!" And with that, Mackenzie makes her way through the portal.

~~~~~

When Mackenzie reaches the other side of the portal, she finds herself on a familiar pathway.

"The park again?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yes," a voice said to her right. Mackenzie jumps and turns around to see a girl that looks just like Karmen, except with golden hair and eyes.

"Geez, you scared me. Who are you anyways?"

"I am the protector of Karmen's memories. I locked this one away since I didn't want anyone malicious to find it. You, however, have seen through the puzzle. Also, Karmen seems to trust you, so I'll show you what you seek. Are you ready to see the truth behind the past?" the protector explains.

Mackenzie gives a nod and says, "I'm ready."

The protector nods and reaches out her hand, a white light shining within it.

"Touch this ball of light. It will show you the answers you seek."

Mackenzie touches the ball of light and suddenly she heard an all too familiar conversation.

"Wait! This is the time Karmen and I saw each other last."

"Yes. The very same day. Now let's not dally," the protector says while walking away. Mackenzie was going to follow, but then she realized there were a lot of demons milling around. Mackenzie grabbed the protector and found a hiding spot.

"Shit, that's a lot of demons."

"Those miscreants found this place. I knew I should've made the mechanism more challenging."

"Best go around them for now. We don't want to fight unless absolutely necessary," Mackenzie explains.

The protector nods. Mackenzie looks around the tree they were hiding behind to find another hiding place closer to the action. There was a bush right near where Karmen's mom was, so she grabs the protector and sneaks over there, being careful not to alert the demons of

her presence. When they get there, Karmen is saying her final goodbye and walking towards her mother. The following conversation shocked Mackenzie.

"I let you say goodbye to your little friend. The least you can do is come when called, you brat."

"Yes mother..." Karmen weakly whispered.

Suddenly, Karmen's mom slaps her across the face. Mackenzie almost gasps, but holds it in as to not give her location away.

"What was that? I didn't hear you," Karmen's mom asks menacingly.

"Yes ma'am," Karmen says, a little louder this time.

"Good, now get in the car, we're leaving."

And with that, Karmen and her mom left, Karmen looking down at her hands, which are clasped in front of her as if there were imaginary chains holding them there. Mackenzie was just crouching in the bush she hid in, looking at the scene in disbelief. The weight of what she just witnessed bore heavily on her, making her whisper a quiet, "What the fuck..."

"This is the answer that you seek. It is your decision what to do with that information," the protector explained.

"So the answer is abuse!" Mackenzie yelled a little too loud, and in her outburst accidentally stepped on a twig, its snap echoing ominously in the silence.

"Well, well. What have we here," a sultry voice sings out. Turns out that there was still a demon on the premises and, with ears sharper than any mortal's, she instantly homed in on her location. With barely a warning, a shadowy tendril shot out towards her from the demon's form and grabbed her leg. The tendril pulled Mackenzie out from the brush and in full view of the demon. The demon looks to be a child with jet black hair and blood red horns protruding out like a ram's horns. There was a crown hanging off her right horn and she was wearing a red dress that really shouldn't be on a child's body.

After Mackenzie is in full view, splayed under the demon, she lets go with a wicked smile.

"Carmine said there was a child snooping around these parts, but to think I would get to meet you in person. Oh, this is going to be so fun," The demon says as she shoots out the shadowy tendrils once more. Panicking, Mackenzie tries to dodge, but it was more of a stumble to the side. The tendril grazes her arm, leaving a painful welt. Finally standing up, she stares down the demon, rage bubbling to the surface. *This bitch thinks that this is some sort of game?* She thought as she lunged towards her with her dagger. Unfortunately, the move was predictable, and the demon easily sidestepped her attack, leaving her exposed. Capitalizing on the misstep, the demon sent another tendril, this time wrapping around Mackenzie's throat.

Gasping for air, she struggled, clawing desperately at the suffocating grip. With her vision blurring from the lack of oxygen and faintly hearing the yelling of Devyn in her ear, Mackenzie swung her dagger wildly, only for it to phase through. As she thought she was going to die, she went to swing her dagger back, and a bright protective barrier surrounded her, wind blowing the demon away enough to make her let go of Mackenzie. As the barrier subsides, the demon looks at Mackenzie, only to see her with a multi-colored set of six wings and horns the shape of a crown. Her once blond streak in her hair is now jet black and her right eye is a pink-ish red. She is flying now and reaches her dagger in front of her, now extremely focused.